

Hedgehog breeder and trainer Jennifer Crespo, of Gardner, Mass., holds "Circus," a one-year-old pet hedgehog – AP photos



## Hedgehogs as housepets?



**Rodrique Ngowi** | *Associated Press*

They are tiny animals with cute faces. They're covered in quills. They roll into prickly balls when they are scared. The ideal pet?

Hedgehogs are steadily growing in popularity across the United States. Laws in at least six states

banning or restricting them as pets don't seem to reduce interest

Breeders say the trend is partly fueled by the fact that hedgehogs require less maintenance than dogs and cats. They emit little odor — in sharp contrast with rodents and rabbits. They are largely hypoallergenic and are solitary. This makes them ideal for people with busy lifestyles.

"A hedgehog can hang out all day while you are at work, you can come home, hang out with it for a couple of hours or . you know, put it away," said hedgehog breeder Jennifer Crespo.

Crespo's 4-year-old son, Wyatt, sat on the sofa in their home recently. His arm was wrapped around the neck of a German shepherd named Ares. An African pygmy hedgehog named Jambalaya clambered across his legs.

The attraction to the animals may have started with a video game. "Sonic" is a blue hedgehog who runs at supersonic speeds and curls into a ball to attack its enemies. Interest has also grown through people sharing pictures of their pets on social media and elsewhere online.

An Instagram account set up by the owners of a hedgehog named Biddy in Oregon has nearly 370,000 followers. National Geographic Magazine put a hedgehog on the cover of its April edition to illustrate a trend of people owning exotic animals.

Jill Warnick, a breeder in Brookline, Massachusetts, says demand for hedgehogs has grown so much over the years that potential pet owners have to fill out an application form and then wait for their turn to buy them.

"When I first started I might have a waiting list of five people," Warnick said, as hedgehogs slept in hiding spots installed in their cages. "Well, 19 years later, I have a waiting list of 500 people."

Breeders typically begin holding hedgehog offspring in their hands for a short time each day beginning a few days after their birth. This gets them accustomed to humans. That helps make pet hedgehogs bond with their owners, said Warnick, who has sold about 350 hedgehogs.

The animals are banned in six states and Washington, D.C., for reasons ranging from being nonnative species to concerns that they could set up a wild population.

Hedgehogs can also shed the salmonella bacterium, which represents a health risk to young children and older people with weakened immune systems.

Pet owners can minimize that risk by washing their hands immediately after handling hedgehogs, cleaning their cages or feeding them, said Sarah McCormack. She's a veterinarian at Fresh Pond Animal Hospital in Belmont, Massachusetts.

**Critical thinking challenge:** *What factors are making hedgehogs popular?*

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